

# Cleared to Circle to Land, Not Ground Loop

The weather was VMC in Osan, but a weak stationary front ran from central Honshu to the Sea of Japan, covering most of our route's first leg. All the clouds were below 20,000 feet, with broken ceilings and embedded thunderstorms. We briefed our flight as a two-leg trip, with a stop in Iwakuni. However, if the weather kept us from shooting an approach, we would skip the first stop and continue west, cross the FIR boundary between Japan and Korea, and fly straight to Osan.

As we cleared the ever-present haze layer, which blanketed the Kanto Plain, I could see the clear skies

**By Lt. Derek Dawson**

"This will be a surveillance approach to runway 02, circle to land 20. MDA is 580 feet."

This definitely was not the best way to start a cross-country. We were a section of Hornets on our way from NAF Atsugi, centrally located on the big island of Honshu in Japan, to Osan AFB in South Korea.

A three-ship of my squadronmates were 15 minutes in front of us, heading to MCAS Iwakuni. Like my section, they were dropping into the Marine base located on the western edge of Honshu for a quick gas and go.

ended in an ominous, gray wall over Mt. Fuji, just 20 miles west of Atsugi. As we got closer to Iwakuni, Metro reported the current field conditions to be 2,000-to-3,000-foot ceilings, unrestricted visibility with





tempo conditions of 1,000-foot ceilings, and with visibility decreasing to two miles. Metro also reported the PAR was operational—although ATIS said it was down—with ASR approaches being provided.

Approach control reported that, because of the prevailing ceilings, the overhead was closed,

approaching rapidly from the north.

I began my approach, saw the runway 02 rabbit lights at 1,100 feet AGL, and broke out underneath at 600 feet. Runway visibility was fine, but I noticed the storm sweeping south across the airfield perimeter. It would be a race to see who got to the runway first: me, on my circling approach, or the storm cell.

As I started my circling maneuver, I descended to 450 feet AGL to stay under the weather. I thought the race was won; I would get in just before the black wall of rain swept over the runway. I reached the abeam and began

my approach turn. Starting a landing at 450 feet felt a lot different than the 600-foot pattern, so I concentrated more than normal on my altitude. I peeked at the field, then at the 135, and saw the field disappear. I

and the PAR was down. We decided to shoot the ASR. After a quick trip through the hot pits, we'd be back in the air. Approach gave us individual squawks, and we separated.

Mountains surround MCAS Iwakuni on three sides. A bay parallels the runway to the east. The rising terrain forces you to fly circling approaches to

had lost the race. The only thing I could discern were four red lights lined up to the north. I assumed they were the rabbit lights for runway 20 and continued my approach, using the lights for lineup information. As I passed through 200 feet AGL, I got nervous, but I thought I had everything squared away. I rolled out, lined up on the lights, and broke out at 90 feet AGL.

That's when I saw those red lights were not rabbit lights—they weren't even lined up on the runway. The lights were 1,000

runway 20 to the east of the field, followed by a sharp hook to the left to avoid overflight of an industrial complex less than two miles north of the field.

I requested my wingman to shoot the approach first. He commenced his approach, and I was vectored into a position 10 miles in trail. My wingman didn't report any problems during his approach, so I thought everything was OK. What we didn't know was a thunder cell was

feet left of the runway and lined up directly with a row of Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force P-3 hangars that shared the base with the Marines. I immediately made a big lineup correction while holding my altitude just below the clouds. I overshot the comeback slightly and touched down nearly 2,000 feet down the 8,000-foot runway.

I just had used one quarter of my available runway and now had to stop a Hornet in high crosswinds and on a wet surface. As soon as I touched the brakes, the jet immediately hydro-



planed. With 4,000 feet remaining, I was at 130 knots, and my nose was pointed 45 degrees to the right of runway heading. I got off the brakes, pumped in left rudder, and dropped my hook. A few seconds later, which seemed like an eternity, I felt the tug of the E-28. Rain was coming down in sheets. Visibility was so low that, from where I sat, next to the one board, I could not see the end of the runway. I told tower in my calmest voice I had taken a trap, visibility was 1,000 feet or less, braking action was zero, and they should close the runway. By the time I got off the runway and taxied to the transient line, the cell had passed, and the field again was VMC.

Later, while debriefing with my wingman, we came up with lessons learned. Though we had plenty of fuel to fly to our second-leg destination, we stood by our decision to shoot the approach into Iwakuni.

We had talked with the station forecaster within 15 minutes of landing. The weather required for the circling ASR approach was 580-1. The worst tempo condition was reported as 1,000-2. Further, metro didn't indicate any storm cells in the immediate area. Nonetheless, in the event we didn't break out, we didn't have a backup plan ready to put into action.


Most importantly, I relearned a basic lesson taught in instrument-ground school. I lost sight of the runway environment after I commenced my circling maneuver. Despite the deteriorating conditions, I wanted to get the jet on deck. I pressed my landing, even though a missed approach definitely was in order. OPNAV 3710.7 states you must commence a missed approach "if visual reference is lost while circling to land from a published instrument approach."

How important was it that I land immediately? Every naval aviator is taught fuel awareness not only is prudent but mandatory. On this day, I was not in any imminent danger of running out of gas. I could have executed a missed approach, waited for the storm to pass, and shot a second approach. Even had the weather not cleared in time, our filed divert field was VMC and a short 70 miles away.

Fuel state aside, by committing myself to landing 2,000 feet long on a runway in heavy rain showers, I put myself in a corner. If braking action was poor, I was committed to relying on

the long-field arresting gear to bring my jet to a safe stop.

Last, a more thorough knowledge of the field-lighting diagram may have prevented me from lining up on a set of hangars, instead of the runway. I have flown into Iwakuni several times and have felt confident in my grasp of the airfield layout and visual references. I let familiarity turn into complacency. Although this event was just a routine cross-country flight, I still was responsible for knowing the possible approaches and the airfield diagram. I was not aware runway 20 had no rabbit lights. Being the active runway, the approach end never would have been marked with red lights.

No matter how much you think you have everything suitcased, it's the things that pop up unexpectedly that can get you. This storm caught nearly everyone by surprise—most of all, me. 

Lt. Dawson flies with VFA-195.

## Mishap-Free Milestones

VF-154	4 years	(10,000 hours)
VAW-121	36 years	(69,948 hours)
VAQ-134	23 years	(46,800 hours)
VMA-223	11 years	(48,000 hours)
VFA-97	8 years	
VAQ-136	15 years	(24,600 hours)
HMH-463	9 years	(19,000 hours)
VR-51	7 years	(20,000 hours)
HS-15	6 years	(19,500 hours)
VFA-192	19 years	
VP-9	24 years	(145,000 hours)
HS-15	6 years	(20,000 hours)
VAQ-129	10 years	(73,642 hours)
HSC-5	8 years	(16,340 hours)
ComPatReconForPac Kaneohe Bay HI		
Executive Transport		
Detachment	17 years	(14,000 hours)